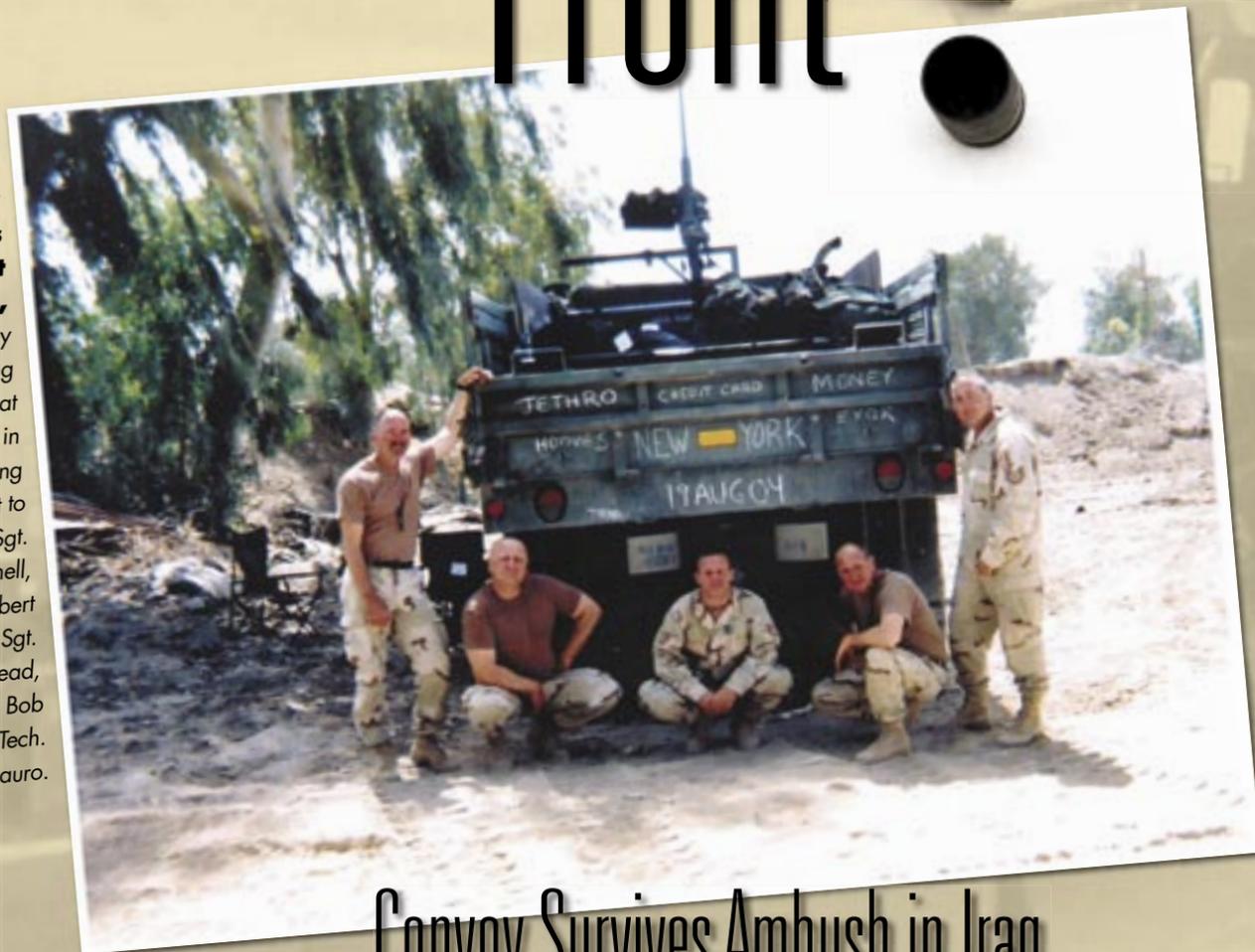


Stories from the Front

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts
photos courtesy of the 106th Rescue Wing

Their job was to provide security for convoys in Iraq, but on Aug. 4, 2004, they were fighting for their lives at an ambush in Mosul. Among them were (left to right) Tech. Sgt. Thomas Connell, Tech. Sgt. Robert Weis, Staff Sgt. Bill Halstead, Tech. Sgt. Bob Busse and Tech. Sgt. Mike Mauro.



Convoy Survives Ambush in Iraq

As the convoy approached Mosul, an Iraqi man looked toward Tech. Sgt. Bob Busse and slid his hand across his throat.

A short while later, the assemblage of about 70 gun trucks, armored Stryker vehicles, tractor trailers and heavy equipment transporters entered a section of Mosul that only a few days prior was the scene of a bustling outdoor market.

On this day, however, "it was eerily quiet," said Tech. Sgt. Robert Weis, who viewed the abandoned setting from the driver's seat of a 5-ton Air Force gun truck. "We looked at each other and said, 'this is not good.'"

The voice of the convoy commander came across the radio, "This is where we've been hit before."

The ambush begins

"When he said that, he might as well have hit the button to start the attack," said Staff Sgt. Bill Halstead, a gun truck commander in the next-to-last vehicle. Two vehicles at the front of the convoy were suddenly disabled by an improvised explosive device and were blocking the road. The convoy came to a halt, with its maneuverability severely restricted by steep curbs on both sides of the road.

From Sergeant Busse's position about three-quarters of the way toward the end of the convoy, the ensuing melee began with a few shots that sounded like firecrackers.

"Then all hell broke loose," said Sergeant Busse, who saw the trail of a rocket propelled grenade streak above his truck, quickly followed by the sound of a large explosion. From his .50-caliber gun box on top of the truck, Tech. Sgt. Michael Mauro witnessed a swarm of Iraqi insurgents suddenly appear from alleyways, rooftops and windows of two- and three-story buildings on both sides of the road.

"It was a well set up ambush," Sergeant Weis said.

From every direction came a barrage of RPGs, Molotov cocktails, mortars and the hissing of bullets whizzing by from AK-47 assault rifles. Sergeant Busse saw an Airman in the gun box in front of him take a shot to the leg. Sergeant Mauro aimed his



Luckily, the only casualties from a convoy ambushed in Mosul last year were two heavy equipment transporters destroyed by an improvised explosive device.

The homemade explosive waylaid the two lead vehicles and temporarily left the convoy at a standstill as approximately 200 insurgents emerged from both sides of the city street to launch their assault.

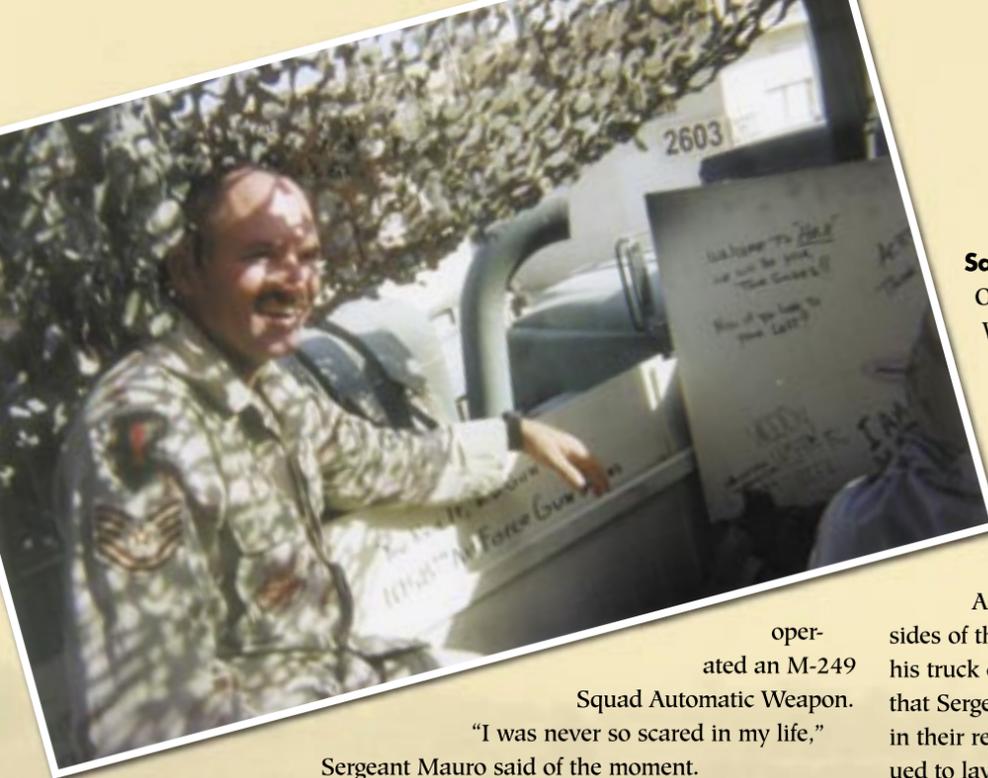
.50-cal toward a window where he spied two silhouettes and opened up a burst of about 30 rounds toward them while yelling, "Let's get out of here!"

Then, realizing the power of his .50-caliber, Sergeant Mauro contained his fire to minimize the shrapnel effect caused by bullets penetrating the walls of nearby buildings, sending cement debris back toward the vehicles. The noise of that weapon left Sergeant Busse almost deaf for the next three days.

Sergeant Halstead left his truck from the commander's position in the passenger seat and sprawled out on the hood. Doing so allowed him to direct his fire to the left without shooting across his driver. A thick cloud of smoke descended from above where his gunner



Airmen prepare their weaponry for another day on the road providing security for convoys that routinely come under attack by Iraqi insurgents. Airmen providing convoy support live alongside Soldiers at Army outposts for six months or longer in Iraq.



Tech. Sgt. Thomas Connell can finally let his guard down and smile as he prepared to depart Iraq after eight months of hazardous convoy support duty.

No one was killed in his company of about 150 transportation specialists from around the United States, but the unit received 18 purple hearts.

operated an M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon.

"I was never so scared in my life,"

Sergeant Mauro said of the moment.

"We were just shooting at silhouettes in every window and rooftop," said Sergeant Weis.

"Am I ever going to get out of it," Sergeant Mauro recalled thinking. "It was crazy. It was crazy. It was crazy."

"All I remember is shooting to the left and to the right," Sergeant Busse said. "It was like a blur. I saw no faces."

Time seemed to slow down. The noise of battle seemed muted, and the scene before them appeared foggy, or as if viewing through a fish bowl.

Survive the chokepoint

The convoy began to slowly move forward again, but that was a small consolation when they realized what they were approaching. It was a chokepoint where passing vehicles were bearing the brunt of intense enemy fire.

"We were thinking, 'If you were in that area you were no good,'" Sergeant Busse said. As they approached the chokepoint, he felt like he was waiting in line at an amusement park. "It was like being on a Disneyland ride. 'OK, guys, now it's your turn to go through the gauntlet.'"

Sergeant Weis remembers a "fight or flight" sensation as they drew closer to the chokepoint, and also described the feeling of being on a bizarre type of carnival ride he didn't want to be on but couldn't get off.

Just as they entered the chokepoint, Sergeant Halstead said, "This is it," and switched his M-16 from single fire to automatic to lay down a suppressing fire. As they entered the worst of it, he looked up to check his gunner who was "smoking a cigarette and frying his weapon up at the same time."

Saving a Soldier

Once safely through the chokepoint, Sergeant Weis approached the burning vehicles and navigated past them. He soon approached a tractor-trailer barely moving. Unable to pass it on the narrow street, he finally managed to pull beside it and yelled, "Are you all right?" "I'm hit, I'm hit," said a female Soldier barely able to steer after a bullet struck her in the left shoulder.

As heavy insurgent fire continued from both sides of the road, Sergeant Weis managed to maneuver his truck close enough beside the wounded Soldier so that Sergeant Busse could grab her and switch positions in their respective trucks while Sergeant Mauro continued to lay down suppressing fire from above with his .50-caliber.

As Sergeant Busse entered the tractor trailer, the truck commander was firing out the passenger window. The mayhem escaped him for a second when he thought, "Wow, this is nice," as he noticed the Army truck was equipped with air conditioning and comfy "air ride seats." He was jolted back to reality by a loud noise from the top of the truck cab, and quickly put the truck in gear and got out of town.

Soon the convoy was exiting the worst of the violence and at about the same time began receiving fire support from an Iraqi national guard unit. Then they were safe within the confines of Camp Diamondback where the Soldier was treated for a minor bullet wound.

The fight had lasted about 40 minutes, but it seemed as if only a few minutes had passed, they said. Almost miraculously, only a few Airmen and Soldiers received minor injuries, while enemy losses were reported at 48 dead, 22 wounded and 15 detained.

Coping with war

When Sergeant Halstead called his wife later that day, he told her, "Honey, you almost lost me tonight," but he didn't go into any detail except to say, "It was bad."

"We were thrilled to find out no one was killed," Sergeant Mauro said. "Someone was looking out for us that day."

None of the four men said they thought about dying during the ambush. They were focused on what they had to do.

"The more you talk about it, the more you think, 'Man we got lucky,'" Sergeant Weis said.

But memories of that day in August have remained

on their minds more than they care to remember. Sergeant Busse said he sometimes has trouble sleeping and will wake up at 3 a.m. thinking he's still in Iraq. "There," he said of nights in Iraq, "I woke up and kept my eyes shut hoping I was back home."

The war changes you, said Sergeant Weis. He was always an easy-going guy before Iraq, but now approaches life with a bit more of a "matter-of-fact" attitude.

"If you drive around Iraq and nothing ever happens to you, you could be OK. But we had IEDs hitting beside us, in front and behind us. You deal with this every day, and you get kind of desensitized to it."

But they're proud of how they performed the day of the attack in Mosul and are relieved that everyone in their unit came home alive after eight months.

"We did good that day," Sergeant Busse said.

"I was proud of being a Marine," Sergeant Mauro said of his time in the Marine Corps, "but I would go to war with these guys any day."

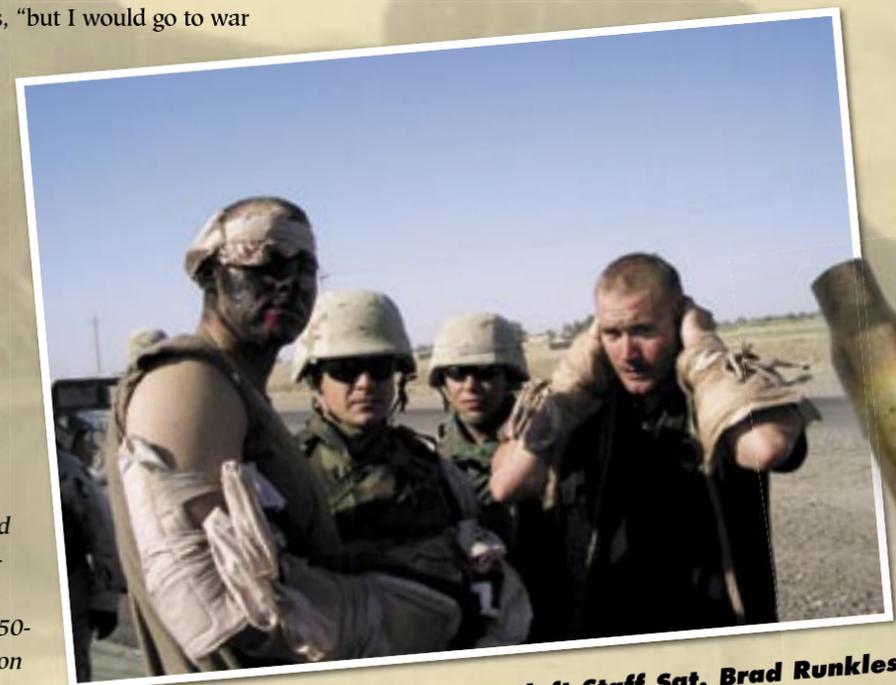
The four Air National Guardsmen in this story were deployed to Iraq for eight months in 2004 with the 1058th Aerospace Expeditionary Transportation Company at Camp Speicher near Tikrit. Their mission was to provide security for military and civilian convoys. Their home unit is the 106th Rescue Wing at Westhampton Beach, N.Y. The fifth member from the 106th deployed to Iraq, Tech. Sgt. Thomas Connell, typically traveled with the 1058th but was detached as a .50-caliber gunner on another mission the day of the Mosul attack. The Aug. 4 attack in this story was but one of several they encountered in Iraq, but it was the most dangerous. As a result, Sergeants Busse, Mauro and Weis were nominated



Broken down south of Baghdad, a five-ton Air Force gun truck with a "hill-billy roof" to protect the .50-caliber gunner from the intense Iraqi sun is loaded

onto an Army heavy equipment transporter. The gun truck is used in Iraq by Air Force transportation specialists to provide convoy security to military and civilian truck drives.

for the army commendation medal with valor. Their company received 18 Purple Hearts. Sergeant Busse is a corrections officer with the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department in New York and lives in Shirley Long Island, N.Y.; Sergeant Halstead is a New York City corrections officer from Massapequa, N.Y.; Sergeant Mauro is a locomotive engineer with the Long Island Rail Road and is from Baiting Hollow, N.Y.; Sergeant Weiss is a corrections officer for Suffolk County in New York and is from Hampton Bays, N.Y.; Sergeant Connell is a tractor trailer driver for the U.S. Postal Service and resides in Medford, N.Y.



An improvised explosive device left Staff Sgt. Brad Runkles with burns to his face and arm, but his wounds from the June 2004 roadside convoy attack have almost healed. Pictured (left to right) are Sergeant Runkles, Tech. Sgt. Juan Suarez, Staff Sgt. Luke Cunningham, and Staff Sgt. Derek Brown, who escaped with minor burns to his arms and face.